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Digital literacy lags state's tech infrastructure

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Ninety-eight percent of Rhode Island has high-speed Internet access, an accomplishment broadband advocates point to as a stellar foundation for working on a less-impressive statistic – about one-third of adults in Rhode Island don't go online.

"The fact that 30 percent of adults in Rhode Island don't use the Internet, even though they have access to it, means we have to keep working hard to increase digital literacy in the state," said Stuart Freiman, broadband-program director for the **R.I. Economic Development Corporation**. "That could lead to giant gains in education, quality of the workforce and quality of life."

Rhode Island earned an 11th-place ranking in the TechNet 2012 State Broadband Index, despite the gap between near-complete broadband, or high-speed Internet access, and the glaring percentage of adults who have not adopted digital habits.

"What this index demonstrates is we have to leverage the stuff that is really good, like our infrastructure, and do more to promote it and make people in the state more aware of why it's important," said Freiman, who is program director of Broadband Rhode Island, an initiative of EDC.

TechNet, a bipartisan policy and political network of CEOs and senior executives that promotes the growth of technology-led innovation, ranked Washington first on its state broadband index and Massachusetts second.

Freiman said when TechNet last did its broadband rankings 10 years ago, Rhode Island wasn't even in the top 35.

The Broadband Rhode Island ini-

tiative pushed the state deeper into digital territory when it got a \$4.5 million federal stimulus grant in 2009. Broadband Rhode Island has gone over the 50 percent mark in spending the grant money, Freiman said.

"A lot of the early spending was on data collection. The highest priority for the federal government was creating a national broadband map," Freiman said.

Now the focus is more on training to spread digital literacy, especially to pockets of the state where some residents may have fallen through the cracks, or simply been unaware of the opportunities for digital training, he said.

The TechNet index also considered economic indicators, such as broadband investments in the state and related jobs.

"Some of the highest-paying jobs and the lowest unemployment are in the technology sector," Freiman said. "It's starting to evolve. We have to change our workforce to have skilled labor and get access to those jobs."

Broadband Rhode Island is pushing to make inroads through community organizations to train residents in digital technology.

"There's no lack of computers out there," said Alisson Walsh, outreach manager for Broadband Rhode Island. "Many private-sector corporations have donated computers, but there's a lack of trainers within organizations to teach people."

One standout in getting on the digital-technology train and going full steam ahead with training is Cranston Public Library, Walsh said.

The Cranston library system is responding to the community's voracious appetite for computer training, said the library's Coordinator of Technology Corrie MacDonald.

"People are waiting at the door when the library opens at 9 a.m. Our computers are very busy all day,"



PBN PHOTO/DAVID LEVESQUE

NET WORK: Corrie MacDonald, standing, a librarian at Cranston Public Library, works with Rhode Island College student Meury Inirio.

MacDonald said. The main library has 24 computers in adult services and 12 in youth services. The library also has two computers from the state Department of Labor and Training used only for job searches and to file for unemployment.

Cranston library staff has always assisted, as much as possible, people looking for jobs who need help on the computer, MacDonald said. But the staff gained additional insight and skills since five members took part in the free "train the trainers" digital-literacy program from Broadband Rhode Island. Staff members use those skills in ongoing programs that are free to the public.

"We offer two sessions of four weeks each in digital literacy," MacDonald said. "We found it's important to have two people teaching – one person presenting and one person going around to help people."

Cranston Public Library got 10 laptops from Broadband Rhode Island, allowing librarians to move classes into a training area, rather than blocking off some of the computers in the library and teaching a just a few people at a time, MacDonald said.

Another organization bridging gaps in the digital divide is **TechACCESS of Rhode Island**, a Warwick-

based nonprofit founded in 1991 to provide assistive technology to people with disabilities.

Betsy Dalton, a founder of TechACCESS, said the TechNet ranking reflects Rhode Island's strong efforts to develop digital literacy. Dalton collaborates with Broadband Rhode Island, along with a network of agencies expanding the accessibility of technology.

"One of the great things Broadband Rhode Island has done is recognize the fact that people not using the Internet are really individuals who have different learning needs," Dalton said.

Dalton said TechACCESS works with teachers, students, rehabilitation programs and veterans to realize the potential of technology and open doors to opportunity. She said the No. 11 ranking by TechNet shows Rhode Island is doing well overall in broadband development.

"But if you look [deeper] into that report, you see we have a ways to go in terms of digital-literacy usage," Dalton said.

"Now it's really boots on the ground," she continued. "We have to get out through the community organizations to get to the people who aren't using the Internet or technology." ■

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ALISSON WALSH

Broadband Rhode Island
outreach manager